

February 4, 2018
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

I once wrote an essay about why faith matters. It was lofty assignment and one that is virtually impossible to answer correctly. I mean – I can tell you how it feels to have faith, I can describe to you the ways it has sustained me personally, I can look back and see how much it has formed me over the years. But, I can't convince you why it matters. I know, that should be my job, right? Certainly they ordained me for a reason. Sure, some days I wish it were just to eat deviled eggs at our potluck dinners but I have a sneaky suspicion that the bishop expected a little more from me on my ordination day.

But here is the thing...I am not in the convincing business. I am, however, in the business of faith and that means that somewhere, somehow I have to find ways for us to talk about and know God. It's a fascinating thing to do each week – to tell you over and over how much God loves you; to tell you how much you are cared for. But, I am also keenly aware that as I say these wonderful words that many of you who are sitting there thinking to yourself – God wasn't there for me when I needed him. Or, there is no way that some divine being up there notices someone as small as me down here.

Frankly, as much as we have talked about second chances these last two weeks, this week seems to be pushing the boundaries a bit. I mean, it's great that so many people in our Gospel reading are getting a new lease on life. These miracles seem so easy for Jesus. And if you are like me, you grew up in church believing this narrative, praying for help and guidance and healing. And you believed it would come from some divine place, out there, that you couldn't see or touch.

However, I know too many people who have prayed those kinds of prayers, who have been taught that with enough faith God will work miracles, only to be left with a dying spouse or a sick child or a troubled friend. Too often, they have heard these healing stories and thought, why not me? Why not my loved one? Why should faith matter when I feel alone and disregarded?

But, I think the question of why faith matters is important especially when we keep waiting for a miracle. It matters because I think we all can relate to that feeling of disillusionment when things don't go the way we want or need them to. It matters because in the very least we have to hope for better days. And we trust that these stories of healing have truth for us even though we may not be walking and talking with Jesus in the flesh.

But, I understand that belief can seem like a stranger when we are in those dark places. So if I can't convince you of God's love, I at least want to encourage you to open your heart when you find yourself doubting why faith matters.

There are two themes I want you to recognize in our readings today.

The first is the greatness of God. The God that creates grand actions, who oversees the creation of this world. As Isaiah tells us – God sits above the circle of the earth and stretches out the heavens with great strength. An everlasting God who does not grow faint or weary. The God that can do all things, the nothing is impossible kind of God.

The second is the gentleness of God. It's the image of God through Jesus Christ in Mark who comes to be among us, who takes our hand and lifts us up so that everyone is touched in some way by God's goodness and mercy. Where even the smallest need is important and worthy of Jesus' time.

Both of these images are true. Both are important. But, it's easy to get stuck on these two aspects alone – thinking that God is going to answer our prayers because he is so great or that Christ is going to heal us because he is so merciful. Because we keep praying. We keep asking for help and the reality is that things sometimes just don't go our way. And when that happens we can easily be left with a gaping hole because our faith didn't fit into one of these two categories.

One writer, Debie Thomas, had this to say about the struggle:

"Don't get me wrong — I love many of the healing stories in the Gospels. I love the power and compassion with which Jesus touches the sick and the suffering, restoring them to their families, their communities, and their vocations. But sometimes I wish that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had included a few less dramatic stories in their books, too. Did Jesus ever, for example, visit a feverish woman, take her hand, and offer only the comfort of his presence — no cure? Did he ever tell a chronically ill child, "I can't take away your pain, but I love you, and I'll try my best to help you bear it?"...Did he ever keep vigil at a deathbed, and cry with the family as they said goodbye? No resurrection — just tears?"¹

I read her words and I thought this feels a little more like the reality we live in. We often don't live with the grand gestures but instead we live with the simple moments. The kind of moments that didn't make it into the bible.

Most of our life is lived between the great image of God and the tangible gesture of Christ's mercy. So, if we only hold faith to those two standards, we will certainly find ourselves at a loss when we face what our day to day life looks like.

I read about an idea that for me, gave me some answers. It was this...

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1640>

That God can't do it everything singlehandedly. So we may have the greatness of God on the one hand and the mercy of Christ on the other but we have a huge expanse of all that is in between.

And...in between God and Christ is each of us. And we are living those moments together where we may not be able to produce the miraculous healing moments that are captured in the bible but we do have the simple, heartfelt moments by someone's bedside.

Isn't faith just as present there? Aren't we the living example of God's greatness and Christ's mercy in our everyday expressions of love and compassion for one another? Do you get where I am going with this?

Take another look at Mark. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Now, she was one of the lucky ones who got to physically touch Jesus' hand. She was one of the lucky ones who experienced faith in the form of a miracle. In many ways, we stop there with her story. We stop there and expect the same. We want her experience with Christ to be our experience.

But, notice what happens next. After she is healed she is so moved by faith, so moved by her love of Christ that she begins to serve and help others. We now that many other sick people came that evening. We know that Christ healed many...many but not all. But we also know that this woman was right there helping. Right there serving and taking care of others.

She couldn't heal the way Christ did. But I can imagine that she was sitting by someone's bedside comforting them through their illness. These are the in between moments that we all find ourselves in. Praying for healing, wanting the miracle. But maybe that miracle is the gift of one another.

Why does faith matter? It matters because through faith we are able to trust that God is continually working in our lives. Maybe not in the grand gestures but in the simple moments. Through faith we are able to trust that when we don't understand the world around us, God is working through each one of us to be the tangible hand of Christ for one another. Faith matters because it strengthens our commitments to one another and reminds us of God's commitment to us. In the grand gestures of God, in the gentleness of Christ, and the in between moments of our lives together. Thanks be to God. Amen.